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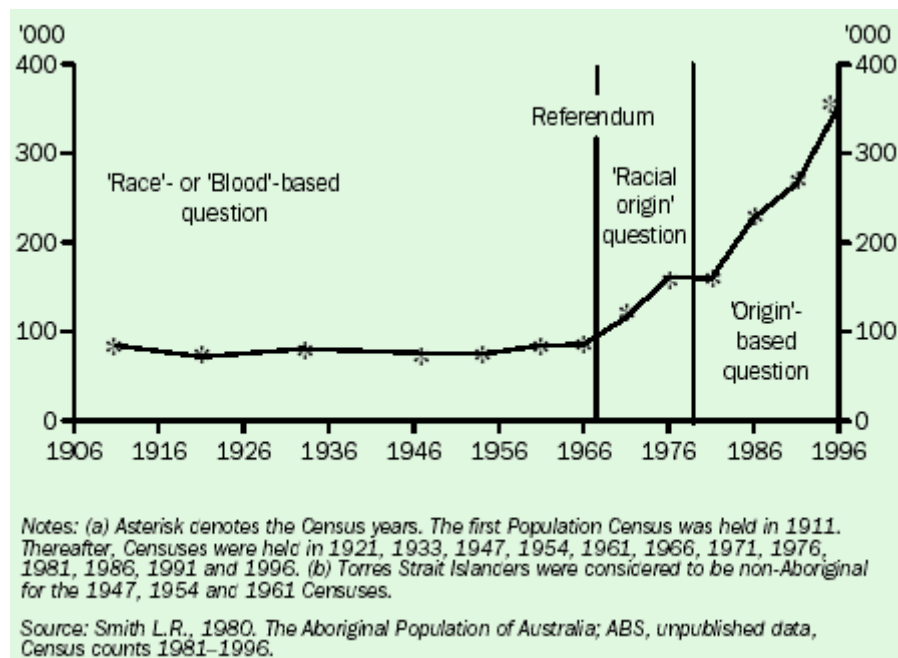
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THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER POPULATION OF AUSTRALIA - CENSUS COUNTS, CONCEPTS AND QUESTIONS IN THE 20th CENTURY

From the time of Federation until the 1967 Constitutional Referendum a question on people's race was asked in all Australian censuses. Data collected from this question allowed persons with more than 50% Aboriginal 'blood' to be excluded from official population figures. Since the Referendum the race question has been rephrased in terms of 'origin', first as 'racial origin' for the two censuses immediately following the Referendum, but subsequently the words 'race' or 'racial' have not been used at all. Instead, a question has been used which asks specifically whether a person is '...of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin'. Within these sets of questions there have been minor variations to the wording and format of questions.

The number of Indigenous Australians enumerated in censuses by these questions, augmented in the censuses before 1966 by estimates of the number of traditional Aboriginal people intentionally excluded from the census counts, is shown in graph 5.34. Up to the time of the Referendum, numbers were fairly static, varying between 80,000 and 100,000. Censuses immediately following the Referendum saw the start of a period of substantial increases in the number of enumerated Indigenous Australians. These increases have continued to this day, with the greatest rate of increase being between the last two censuses (1991-1996).

5.34 INDIGENOUS COUNTS (PLUS AUGMENTED ESTIMATES), CENSUSES 1911-1996



The 1967 Referendum ushered in a major change in the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were viewed in Australian society. Census questions are constructed to reflect the society in which they are asked. Thus, prior to the Referendum one intent of the question (and a constitutional requirement, see below) was to allow for the exclusion of persons with more than 50% Aboriginal 'blood' from the Census counts. In the censuses after the Referendum, a shift in societal attitudes can be seen by the dropping of 'race' or 'racial' from the questions, and terms such as 'half-caste' and 'full blood' from the explanatory notes on the questions. The resulting 'origin'-based question is more inclusive than previous questions. As the position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has changed, there has been a corresponding change in the way the Census question is viewed and answered. Since 1967 more and more Indigenous people have responded affirmatively to a question about their origins. This movement has grown in recent censuses, and the Census question is seen by some respondents not just as a question about ancestral origins but also, or even alternatively, as about cultural identification.

Exclusion before 1967

Prior to 1967, the Australian Constitution provided that 'in reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted' (s. 127). As this was an exclusory provision of the Constitution it was interpreted narrowly, so that 'Aboriginal' was taken to mean persons with more than 50% Aboriginal 'blood' (ALRC 1986, p. 69). Census questions based on race were used to establish the number of people satisfying this criterion, usually referred to as more than 'half-castes'. As counting of 'full-bloods' was not a prime purpose of the Census, remote areas of Australia which were very largely uninhabited by non-Aboriginal people were not enumerated. Thus early Aboriginal counts were sometimes modified in recognition of this. For example, the 1966 Census Summary of Characteristics for the Aboriginal Population states:

'Prior to the 1966 Census Aborigines "out of contact" were not enumerated and estimates of these were made by authorities responsible for native welfare. It is estimated that at the 1954 Census 12,956 Aborigines (of which 2,311 were estimated to be in Queensland, 1,760 in South Australia, 3,516 in Western Australia, and 5,369 in the Northern Territory) were not contacted by Census collectors and were not included in the Census. Increasing numbers however, were coming into contact and at the 1961 Census it is estimated that 2,000 Aborigines in Western Australia and 1,944 in the Northern Territory were not contacted by Census collectors. At the 1966 Census, efforts were made to obtain complete coverage.' (CBC&S 1969, p. 4).

The 1967 Constitutional referendum

The main source of Commonwealth legislative power is s. 51 of the Constitution. The 1967 Referendum altered s. 51(26) to remove the exclusion of the 'aboriginal race' from the Commonwealth's powers to make special laws for people of any race.

As a result of the 1967 Referendum, the words 'aboriginal person' no longer appeared in the Constitution, and the Commonwealth acquired a power to legislate for the 'aboriginal race' which was previously held solely by the States. In this new context, government policy-makers and agencies were free to reflect societal attitudes in developing new definitions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Further, it was no longer necessary to have an exclusory concept of 'aboriginal' and the way was open to move towards a more inclusive definition. This factor, combined with the changing societal values, resulted in the evolution of the 'origin' based Census questions.

The Commonwealth working definition

The process of developing the well known and widely accepted 'Commonwealth working definition' of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander commenced immediately after the Referendum. This definition states that 'An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives.' (DAA 1981, p. 1).

One of the earliest references to a definition close to the Commonwealth working definition was in May 1968 when the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs defined an Aboriginal person as 'a person of whole or partial Aboriginal descent, who claims to be an Aboriginal and is accepted as such by the community with which he is associated'. Torres Strait Islanders were included in the definition in 1972. During the period 1973 to 1978 an extension to include South Sea Islanders was considered and rejected. Finally, in October 1978, the Commonwealth working definition was endorsed by Federal Cabinet. (DAA 1981, pp. 6-8).

The current ABS standard for Indigenous status

In 1995, the ABS adopted a formal standard for 'Indigenous status' (figure 5.35). This standard is based on a nominal definition equivalent to the Commonwealth working definition. However, its operational definition is 'origin' based. This standard question was first used in the 1996 Census. Although it is based on the descent element of the Commonwealth definition, Torres Strait Islanders

5.35 THE ABS STANDARD QUESTION

<p>Is the person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">For persons of both Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin, mark both 'Yes' boxes.	<p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Aboriginal</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Torres Strait Islander</p>
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The history of the enumeration of Torres Strait Islanders is also varied. Prior to the 1947 Census, Torres Strait Islanders were regarded as Aboriginal and were treated in the same way in the Census with the same approach to people with more than 50% Torres Strait Islander 'blood'. In the 1947 Census, Torres Strait Islanders were considered to be Polynesian and were included in official counts; in the 1954 and 1961 Censuses they were considered to be Pacific Islanders and

were again included in official counts. For the 1966 Census, however, Torres Strait Islanders were classified as Aboriginal and were excluded from official figures (ABS 1993).

References

ALRC Australian Law Reform Commission. CBC&S Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics. DAA Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

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